

CHAPTER 7: POW/MIA FAMILIES

MISSING A LOVED ONE

Nothing can produce emotion, passion and controversy like war. How could anyone ever forget the scene of a returning POW from Vietnam kissing the ground as he first set foot on U.S. soil after years of captivity, and the thrill of watching his wife and children run across the tarmac and into his open arms? When a soldier comes home, it is a joyous reunion.

War also claims victims and produces often untold suffering. Men and women are killed, and their loved ones mourn. Taps, flags, military funerals, tears of sadness and shattered dreams are all products of war. One of the worst tragedies of all is that some simply become "missing." Their loved ones both mourn and hope. The years drag on, and the long wait for answers can become unbearable. In this regard, the Committee notes with sadness the tragic death last year of Mrs. Marion Shelton, the devoted wife of Capt. Charles Shelton, USAF, the only serviceman still officially listed by the Department of Defense as a "POW" captured in Laos during the war.

What could be worse than the emotional turmoil of "not knowing?" Two family members explained their feelings:

When a beloved son becomes missing in any war, parents like us become the living dead.⁵⁰³

He loved the Air Force and because of that love, I chose to serve in the same branch. I feel I owe an awful lot to my big brother, Buddy. Not a day goes by that I don't wonder what happened to him and if he could still be alive.⁵⁰⁴

For many Korean War POW/MIA families, this anguish has lasted for four decades; for Vietnam War POW/MIA families, many have hoped and prayed for 20 years.

National security is no longer a valid excuse for events that happened 40 year ago. . . .

I feel the American people need to understand some of the anguish that families experience when a father is taken away and there's no explanation given to the child as to why. . . .

[My daughter] writes, "I recently returned from Russia where I spent two weeks with my mother searching for clues regarding my father's disappearance. I found no answers, just more questions. I don't know what to say, except that as I write this memories of my childhood haunt me, and I am crying. They are tears of sadness, for I never met my father.

"I grew up wondering what he was like. I was told he was dead. Then a year ago I found out he was probably taken prisoner of war at the time of the incident and might still even be alive. These days I cry, wondering

⁵⁰³ Father of serviceman missing in action.

⁵⁰⁴ Sister of serviceman shot down in December, 1972.

about all the pain and suffering he must have endured, and I wonder if he's still alive somewhere in Russia, or maybe someone else is still alive.

"Please keep working on the exchange of information between our two countries. There are many good people on both sides willing to help."⁵⁰⁵

Another Korean War veteran and POW/MIA family member also has wondered—and persisted in his efforts to find the truth—for more than 40 years:

I was a Korean War veteran; two tours of duty in Korea. I had four brothers on the front line at one time. My youngest brother was captured on November 4, 1950 at Anju, northeast of Anju, right up here on the map.

In 1953, when the last group of prisoners of war were released on September 3rd or 4th, and I looked at the television set after I had gotten home—I came out all right—and I didn't see my brother's name on that list, I told my mother and father there are three things wrong here. You have to be a prisoner of war, killed in action, or missing in action. That's three categories. And I'm sure he was one of those three, and I was hoping he would have been alive, and is still alive today.

So, I made a promise to my mother and father in 1950 that I would never stop looking for him until I brought him home, dead or alive.⁵⁰⁶

Families' views and experiences

The Committee understands and it is impossible to make general statements about specific family members who have all suffered in their own way from the tragedy of having a "missing" loved one. Whether we speak of Vietnam or prior wars, the pain is the same.

Families are diverse in their views, in the particular circumstances surrounding the loss of their loved one, in the experience they have had in dealing with their government, and in the feeling toward the Communist governments who hold answers.

Some believe the U.S. Government had done all it can over the years; others believe it has bungled inexcusably. Some of these families have decided to accept death and move on with their lives; others wait, convinced that living Americans remain in captivity.

No one among the Senators on this Committee is qualified to criticize the beliefs of the families. None of us has a missing loved one from a prior war. On these questions, every POW/MIA family member has fair claim to be considered an expert in the saddest truest sense of the word.

The families have suffered the indignities of Communist governments who have refused to provide even basic humanitarian information and answers over the past half-century. They have endured the emotional roller-coaster ride of hope and failure year after year after year. They have watched governments in Southeast Asia drift

⁵⁰⁵ Jane Reynolds Howard testimony, Nov. 10, 1992.

⁵⁰⁶ Robert Dumas testimony, Nov. 10, 1992.

ble out remains and heard flat denials that records exist—and then seen that these documents existed all along.

With the full cooperation of these governments in past years, results would have been obtained for many POW/MIA families long ago. Former President Nixon himself said in January 1992:

It has been obscene, the way they have just dribbled out information to these poor families who simply want to know what happened.⁵⁰⁷

The families have been the victims of fraud and they have seen their own ranks divided by intense differences over the best way to obtain results. Through it all, they have persevered.

Through years of not knowing, both during and after the war, of bearing the brunt of bureaucracies incapable of answering questions or responding to requests, of grappling with wrenching and sometimes conflicting information, and of dealing with the inhumane actions of former enemies, POW/MIA families have unfailingly kept their hopes alive and realistic.

The feelings and commitment of POW/MIA families may best have been summed up by the son of a serviceman shot down over Laos:

I was 16 years old when my dad was shot down. Dad was 42. He was a big man with a good sense of humor and a big appetite for life. He liked sports cars, bagpipe music, Irish whiskey; he fished, he rode broncos in the Rodeo; he loved New Mexico and the Air Force.

I remember him vividly, and miss him terribly. Nonetheless, I have long been resigned to the fact that he's almost certainly dead, and resigned to the fact that I will probably never know what happened to him. But that does not relieve me or you of the obligation to try to find out what did happen to him.

I don't expect the impossible, only the confidence that the Government that ordered my father into combat is doing all that it can to determine his fate and that my family knows all that this Government knows.⁵⁰⁸

Families' central role in Committee's work

The Committee owes its creation to the activism of family members, and from the beginning we sought to work closely with POW/MIA families. Family members were represented at the Committee's opening and closing hearings. In addition, the Chairman and Vice Chairman addressed the 1992 conventions of the National League of Families and the National Alliance of Families.

To ensure that families' concerns were addressed, the Committee's Chairman and Vice Chairman wrote to the primary next-of-kin of all 2,266 then unaccounted for servicemen in January 1992, seeking their advice and participation. Over the course of the Committee's year in existence, more than 100 responded, and both the

⁵⁰⁷ Richard M. Nixon comments, "Larry King Live," Jan. 8, 1992.

⁵⁰⁸ Testimony of Steve Morrissey, Dec. 3, 1992.

League and the Alliance have actively monitored the Committee's work.

In addition, C-SPAN coverage of 18 of the Committee's 22 open hearings has kept an audience of 59 million viewers informed. "Please talk to as many families as you can—they are the only ones holding the truth," one family member wrote. "I was glued to TV [coverage of the hearings] and watched until 5:30 a.m."

The questions before the American public are the ones that still gnaw at the families. If there are leads that can be traced to a living American serviceman, then there must be facts, places, dates, and descriptions or names. Some of the rhetorical questions of activists have been provocative, but at the same time the Government has jealously guarded its documents.

Through all of this, the families simply want answers and results. The Committee has focused on compelling leads and questions based on facts. The families deserved no less than an honest search to understand the truth. We sought information from all sources, public and private, including activists and current and former government officials.

The families of the missing deserve not merely words, but actions, answers, and—above all—the truth. The Committee has labored tirelessly in their behalf to provide them the truth. It is a labor of love, devotion, and gratitude.

The search for answers

In families' search for answers, two ingredients are essential. First, they must know the U.S. is pressing Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia for all information they have. As the wife of a serviceman missing in Laos, explained:

If these men are not alive today, it's because they were either starved, executed, mistreated, or simply died of broken hearts in the last 20 years it has taken to go looking for them. They [the Lao or Vietnamese] know where my husband is. I know this. My family will not rest until we find the fate of David.⁵⁰⁹

Second, families must know that the U.S. is doing all it can on behalf of missing servicemen. As Ann Mills Griffiths, the League's Executive Director told the Committee:

The vast majority of the POW/MIA families are realistic. We don't expect miracles. We expect seriousness by our own government, Executive and Legislative branches, rather than spontaneous reaction to the squeaky wheel or the latest editorial.⁵¹⁰

Beyond that, however, what constitutes an answer about the fate of a missing loved one varies from individual to individual. To satisfy U.S. Government "accounting," policy requires "the man alive, the man's remains, or convincing evidence of why it's not possible."⁵¹¹ For families, the standard is generally different: photo-

⁵⁰⁹ Hrdlicka testimony, Dec. 3, 1992.

⁵¹⁰ Griffiths testimony, Nov. 6, 1991.

⁵¹¹ Griffiths testimony, Dec. 4, 1992.

graphs are compelling for some; for others, positively identified remains are the only acceptable proof; for still others, even remains are not convincing.

Many families know that the answers available most often are merely clues and not full answers; but few can accept inexplicably conflicting information as satisfactory, even in a partial answer:

[At the time of my brother's disappearance], the Army told us that every effort was being made to locate him, including dropping leaflets with his picture. Three months later, the story changed. They said he had been engaged in a skirmish, that he was ahead of the majority group and then shot. No other information was provided at the time and we never got his body or any of his personal effects. As far as my family is concerned, there are still many unanswered questions: What really happened? Who were the men with him? Where are his things?⁵¹²

I am not expecting a miracle, but I do want to know and have an explanation/accounting of what took place. Were there, for example, eyewitnesses? Is this a crash site that has previously been excavated? What is the terrain? * * * My personal goal is to do for [him] what I couldn't do then and resolve my grief issues. . . This is the least I can do; Len and others like him made the ultimate sacrifice.⁵¹³

It was during a monsoon, and due to the terrain, a ground crew could not get to the plane and a helicopter could not land. After about seven days, they presumed them dead * * * we have wondered for 23 or 24 years. Just to know for sure—something—would help. My mother has never remarried, thinking that someday a miracle might happen and he could come home. We all need to know . . .⁵¹⁴

He saved seven men and carried them to a safe place and then returned to his post. All of the men he saved have since died. This is just a father who is still hoping for that "someday" when we will hear more.⁵¹⁵

If my father is dead, I want him brought back and buried at Arlington with the rest of the dead heroes. Because no matter what anyone thinks of the futile and tragic war in Vietnam, the men who fought there were heroes. If my father is alive after all these years, he must think we've forgotten him. I want him to know that we haven't. There is still time to bring him home. If others are alive, we must bring them all home. My wish is simple. If my father is alive, I want to know him, not things about him. If he is dead, I want to be able to put a flower on his grave.⁵¹⁶

This search for the truth by the families was frustrated over the years by limited information from the governments of Southeast

⁵¹² Sister of serviceman missing since August, 1968.

⁵¹³ Sister of serviceman missing in South Vietnam since September, 1968.

⁵¹⁴ Son of serviceman missing since 1968.

⁵¹⁵ Father of son missing in action.

⁵¹⁶ Letter, son of pilot shot down over North Vietnam.

Asia, and by our own government's failure to provide satisfactory answers. In fact, according to many families, the policies and actions of the U.S. Government during and after the war not only failed to resolve the problems, but the lack of attention and focus in past years actually made things worse.

For families whose experience with the Government has shattered their faith in it, only fully disclosure of everything the Government knows will reassure them.⁵¹⁷

U.S. GOVERNMENT ACTIONS DURING THE WAR

If there is one facet of the POW/MIA issue that is without ambiguity, without disagreement, it is that the treatment accorded families of missing Americans has deepened their anguish, not lessened it.

War-time secrecy

The difficulties confronting most families were rooted not only in their kin's loss, but also in the secrecy surrounding the loss. At first, families were not told—sometimes for years—that their husbands, sons or brothers had been captured. The impact of war-time secrecy on the lives of families can best be described in their own words. As Donnie Collins, wife of then-Captain Tom Collins (captured in October, 1965), testified:

Mrs. COLLINS. Tom was missing four years, two months, and two weeks, and I received a letter from him in Christmas of '69. Now, I knew before then, but not through anything the Government did. I found on my own that Tom as seen alive in Hanoi in 1966. . . . I was more fortunate than most family members. I had friends in high places.

Sen. SMITH. Do you have any reason to believe that anybody in the United States Government knew he was alive and did not tell you?

Mrs. COLLINS. Oh, yes, I'm certain that they did.

When families were informed of their loved one's fate, they rarely were given important details. As Mrs. Collins explained:

I, as an MIA wife, was frustrated by knowing little, being left out of the loop, and it seemed at times being treated as the enemy, more feared by the administration and military intelligence than the North Vietnamese whom we should have been unified against. This was typical of the attitude of the Government in those years.

Another MIA wife, whose husband was lost in December, 1967,

. . . was notified about my husband's MIA status by telephone. When I asked if my husband's navigator, who he had trained with, was with him, Air Force would not give me an answer. . . . since [his] navigator's wife was

⁵¹⁷ At publication time, almost half of all POW/MIA families had responded to a DoD questionnaire asking their permission to include their kin's casualty files in the materials to be declassified (in accordance with the McCain Amendment). Of the total, 38 percent assented; eight percent declined, and three percent asked to review their casualty files before making a decision.

pregnant, I did not want to call and upset her if her husband had not been on that plane. It took a sideways call to the Pentagon from one of the colonels on base to get the needed information. He told me never to tell who got me the information.

And all were cautioned to say nothing about their husbands, sons and brothers, so as not to give their captors leverage over the men.

. . . [T]hey said, "you don't need to know this. . . if you were to let this out, this could cause his death—now, you wouldn't want to do that, would you?" I love that old hang-that-guilt-trip-on-them.⁵¹⁸

The effect was devastating for many. As one MIA wife explained:

I needed the support of other families who knew what I was going through. I asked my Personnel Affairs officer and sergeant to deliver my hand written notes to other wives who lived within 100 miles. There were only a few, but I did not know the names and right-to-privacy laws demanded that I go through the casualty office. In my notes I offered my home as a rest or coffee stop when other women came to shop. When I received no word of reply from my notes, I accepted the fact that the other women wanted their privacy and I'd have to go it alone.

Everyday some well-meaning civilian would call or come by and say, "My dear, I don't know how you do it." I'd just be devastated! When they'd leave or hang up I'd think, "Yes—how do I do it?" I really needed the support of the other women; the other wives of POW and MIA.

I did not learn for four years that my notes had not been delivered to the single hearings or picture viewings at the base. Why were we never allowed to get together? Why were my notes withheld?⁵¹⁹

To her, the Government lost all credibility when its directives not to publicize the POW's fate⁵²⁰ didn't change as soon as the U.S. knew its men were being tortured:

⁵¹⁸ Collins testimony, Dec. 3, 1992.

⁵¹⁹ Letter, Dec. 8, 1992.

⁵²⁰ Mrs. Stockdale described the directives this way:

"In the spring of 1965, months before Jim was shot down, a Commander Hill from Naval Air Pacific Headquarters had given a briefing to us wives in Air Group 16 about how we should behave if our husbands were shot down and captured. . . .

"The first paragraph [of notes I took to share with wives who could not be there] was about method of notification, with every effort being made to do this in person. And if this was not possible, then by telegram or phone, to prevent the primary next-of-kin hearing the news from the media.

"The next paragraph was about immediate recommended action by primary next-of-kin. Parents of the prisoners and parents-in-law of the prisoners should be notified by telephone, we were told. They should be warned not to release any information about the prisoner and not to be interviewed by the press concerning his background.

"We were told that next-of-kin should engage someone to act as her telephone operator. This person should be instructed to accept no calls from foreign cities outside the limits of the United States. No information of any kind should be released about the prisoner or his family. All such inquiries should be referred to the Public Information Officer at Air Pacific Headquarters.

"We were told that the standard answer to all news agencies should be, Mrs. Blank has no comment for the press at this time. The reasons for maintaining press silence are in the best interests of the prisoner. Any information other than name, rank, serial number and age can be

Giving the Johnson Administration and its Ambassador at Large in charge of prisoner of war affairs, Averill Harriman, the benefit of the doubt, some might assume that these guidelines really were engendered in the best interest of the wives.

That rationale became totally invalid for me, however, when the Johnson Administration learned for a fact certain that American prisoners of war were being brutally tortured, but continued to insist that we wives remain silent in order to continue our husband's so-called good treatment by the North Vietnamese.

I know the Government knew of the brutal torture for a fact certain, because I was the conduit who delivered the message to the Johnson Administration. Averill Harriman never came off his insistence that we wives must keep quiet in order to ensure the so-called good treatment of our loved ones.

It was not until more than two years after Averill Harriman knew our men were being tortured that Melvin Laird, Secretary of Defense in the newly elected Nixon Administration, publicly acknowledged the gross mistreatment of our men and the violations of the Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war.

On the 19th of May, 1969, when Secretary Laird first made this public announcement, Jim Stockdale had been in prison for almost four years. . . .

No one in the Johnson Administration, not McNamara, nor Rusk, nor the Bundy brothers, nor Clifford, ever seemed to realize that we wives were not so stupid as to not be able to figure out that they wanted to suppress the

skillfully used in psychological warfare to coerce the prisoner to aid the Communist propaganda program.

"Pictures of the family of the prisoner can also be used as coercion and thus be detrimental to the welfare of the prisoner.

"Treatment of the prisoner. We were told prisoners at present are being well treated by the—excuse me. Prisoners at present are being treated and authorities have every reason to believe that this condition will continue. If present conditions do continue, the prisoner will probably not have to undergo brutal torture. The family of the prisoner can expect that eventually the Communists will announce that the prisoner has signed some paper which he would not sign under normal circumstances. The family should not comment on this announcement as the information is probably correct.

"All prisoners to date have signed some paper which they would not be expected to do unless victims of psychological warfare.

"Any medals awarded the prisoner in his absence should be accepted by the family of the prisoner when they are offered. The family may expect to see pictures of the prisoner in various compromising roles released by the Communists for propaganda purposes. Comments about such pictures only help serve the purposes of the enemy.

"Communication with the prisoner. We were told the family will be given an address through which they can write to the prisoner. All letters should be of a very general nature. Children or friends should not be mentioned or referred to other than in general terms. Families are warned to delete terms of endearment from their mail, as these can be used to the prisoner's detriment.

"No letters should be written that one would not be able to tolerate if printed on the front page of any newspaper.

"Mail may eventually be received from the prisoner and will probably be forwarded through the International Red Cross. These letters will also be of a very general nature and will not contain any of the usual terms of endearment used by the prisoner.

"Packages may be mailed to the prisoner but there will be no assurance of delivery.

"My final entries say, families are strongly urged not to intercede on behalf of the prisoner without State Department approval. Independent intercessions on the part of the individual could seriously damage negotiations being conducted on behalf of the prisoner by the State Department.

truth about our men's circumstances in order to keep the American public from being emotionally involved in the Vietnam War.

Just as they never called up the reserves or imposed rent controls, they didn't want the truth about our men's torture to emotionally involve the American people in their stick and carrot war.

I knew only too well they had started their war under false pretenses, because my husband had led all of the air strikes in the Tonkin Gulf incidents. President Johnson had even doubly endangered all of the lives of the men in the first air strike against the North Vietnamese mainland by announcing their arrival to the enemy on the radio an hour and a half before they arrived.

The gag order was too much for some:

Mrs. COLLINS. Let me just go back and point out a couple of things. That Tom was heard on the radio. He was seen coming out of the plane. He had a wing man, there were another two in the formation. He was seen on the ground. So they did know he got on the ground. They did talk to him. Yet even later on, they never allowed anyone who was with him on his wing or behind him, the two behind him, to tell me anything at all, even that bare little element to hang onto.

As I say, I can deal with dead. . . . But missing, they didn't know how to deal with missing. So they decided that the best thing to do was don't tell the families anything.

I want to remind you that Tom was security ops officer. Because of that, he had such a security clearance you would never achieve to, Senator. John will tell you that. And because of that, I was brought into the loop and I was also part of the security clearance. So Tom didn't marry a dodo who fell off the turnip truck when it went through town on Saturday. Most pilots did not.

Vice Chairman SMITH. That is very obvious, by the way.

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you. And because of that, why they could not sort out and tell the families the basic elements. When I later found out in early '68 that they had had this information in his jacket, I was angry but I told no one, including his parents, what was in the jacket, no one.

Now, if you read my testimony you realize that I was jumped on by big-time people. I mean State Department threatened me with you're going to shut up or else, and I never could figure out what or else was. I guess the firing squad, send Tom to Hanoi, something equally obnoxious.

As I responded to them finally, no military has control over a wife. Only the military member himself may discipline her. So if you can find Tom and get him home and he wants to kick me in the rear end, let him go at it, but don't threaten me. And finally I had to call friends in high places to get the State Department off me because I decided, in '66, to ask some questions in the public. So I was probably the first one to get swatted.

Secrecy's effects

The secrecy had two distinct ill effects. First, it back-fired:

the old military cliché that wives and families should be told nothing and should know nothing was, and I presume to some degree is still, the rule. This is an over-reaction to legitimate military security needs, and has probably resulted in more inadvertent leaks through ignorance than if the spouses and families had been brought into the network in matters that concerned them. . . . Had they brought us into the loop, telling us the things that we had a right to know from the onset, we would never find ourselves in this position today.

Second, and far more damaging to both families and subsequent Government efforts, the secrecy made families an easy mark for any con artist with information to peddle. In Collins' words:

The closed-door attitude of the Government, which started and became ingrained in the early war years, has contributed greatly to making the families vulnerable and prey for the antiwar activists on the left and the con artists and mystics on the right. If the Government was silent to their questions, then where were they to go for information and help? Some elements of both groups meant well, but their impact has been cruel to the families.⁵²¹

Another witness, Carol Hrdlicka, laid the blame for fraudulent schemes more forcefully at the Government's door:

I can appreciate these other scams, but I have to tell you that if our Government had done their job in the first place, I wouldn't be in the situation where I could be a victim or Carol Collins could be a victim.⁵²²

In sum, another MIA wife said:

I tell you as I told the [PFOD] hearing: if a situation like this happens again I hope you all are smart enough to know you can trust the families with inside knowledge to protect them from con artists. I did not bite when asked for a donation to bring home the men. I felt I had paid enough.⁵²³

Mis-reporting

When evidence suggested death

Tragically for many families, strong incentives existed for combat veterans to soften the blow that reporting a buddy killed in action would deliver to families. Admiral Stockdale felt the pressures after he witnessed a plane go down:

He was in an AD—last called a Mayday, hit about 1,000 feet going in a steep dive, and of course, as you know, John, [there was] no ejection seat in that plane. They went

⁵²¹ Collins testimony, Dec. 3, 1992.

⁵²² Hrdlicka testimony, Dec. 3, 1992.

⁵²³ Letter, Dec. 8, 1992.

our there the next morning and they found that the Vietnamese had removed the debris.

And the squadron commander said the guy is—he's dead. And I went up to see Captain Bart Connally and I said I'm just getting started in this thing. And I sent the message, whether I should have called him KIA or MIA. . . . He said, "I did this in World War II, of course, and, he said, there's a great temptation to do the wife a favor. But in the long run I think you do her an injustice, because you're giving her the wrong message. If you think he's dead, say he's dead.

Now, I did that [reported the man killed in action]. . . . I've been told that people who were seen to spin in the traffic pattern and crash in their plane were listed as MIA for that same darned reason. We ought to think of a better way to compensate families besides lying to them.

Gen. Vessey had experienced the same situation:

Sen. McCain. You and I have discussed, and I mentioned to Admiral Stockdale yesterday, this very tragic situation that exists when a person is listed as missing or captured, especially in the case of the air war.

There were cases that we know of—Admiral Stockdale cited one yesterday, where the plane hit the ground and exploded and no chute was cited; but with the knowledge that if that person is declared dead, all benefits cease after his death (gratuities, insurance, etc.), [his buddies listed] that person as missing. Then the pay and benefits continue for an indeterminate length of time.

Do you have any idea how we can get around this dilemma, General?

Gen. Vessey. . . . It's something that drives our making inaccurate reports. The very fact that you deprive your comrade's family of their livelihood by declaring him dead . . . so the inclination generally has been, if there's any doubt at all, move [the status report] toward the missing rather than face the facts. . . . I think the present system will drive us to the same problems that we had from the war in Vietnam.

In 1973, Lt. Cdr. George Coker cited two examples of what he had seen as a Navy pilot in an address to the National League of Families:

A guy is flying, he does see his wingman shot down. Two guys go in, and they're deader than a doornail. He's thinking to himself, "If I report that they're dead, the wife's going to be brokenhearted, she'll get death gratuities, and that's it. If I report him MIA, his pay keeps going, and it will cushion the blow for a little while."

"I just saw your son fly into the ground." Do you think I'm going to tell you that? Hell, no, because the way I think, if I tell you your son got target fixation and flew into the ground, to my way of thinking, what I would be

saying to you is, "You know, what you had for a son is a real idiot."

That's not true, so what am I going to say? "Well, he flew down, and he probably lost control, he was probably hit by a 57 or something and lost control of the aircraft and went in." But I'm not going to say, "I think he had target fixation." . . .

But now I've given you a shred of hope. It's not an out-and-out false report. I told you he flew into the ground, but I just twisted 'why.' So now he has the option of ejecting.⁵²⁴

When evidence pointed to life

However, the Committee also uncovered cases where servicemen were reported as dead, in view of information suggesting survival. Moreover, the families were never provided with this information.

For example, the Committee notes the following comments from the family members of two cases in particular:

Lance Corp. Kenneth L. Plumadore was officially listed as KIA/BNR, although a 1992 case narrative from the JTF-FA indicates that PAVN forces may have captured him. In 1992, Plumadore's sister wrote to the Pentagon:

If what I am told is correct and the government continues to withhold intelligence data on my brother's capture that has been concealed from his family for 25 years, I submit to you the following questions: What reason is there for secrecy now? Why am I not entitled to know everything about my brother that you know?⁵²⁵

Maj. Robert F. Coady, USAF, was listed as missing in Laos since 1969. His family was only provided the initial loss report, but recently discovered that there was additional information which suggested that Coady may have survived his incident. In 1969, the U.S. Embassy in Laos reported a possible correlation between Coady and a similar name reported by a POW who returned in 1969. Coady's sister wrote to the Committee in August 1992:

When my family asked if there was any information on my brother, we were told there was nothing but the initial report of his loss. I could not believe that after 17 years of believing the Air Force I found out that there was information regarding my brother not given to the family. I find this totally unacceptable.⁵²⁶

A final example concerns a serviceman believed dead during the war, but subsequently determined to have been captured. This example was brought to the Committee's attention in November 1991 by Dr. Patricia O'Grady, the daughter of Col. John O'Grady, who was captured in 1967 in Vietnam:

O'GRADY. I testify before you today on behalf of my father, Col. John O'Grady, who is finally known to have

⁵²⁴ Coker, Oct. 27, 1973.

⁵²⁵ Patricia Plumadore letter July 14, 1992.

⁵²⁶ Judith Coady Rainey letter Aug. 29, 1992.

been captured alive. This information could have been obtained many years ago, but after 24 years, I can finally tell you how many cigarettes were in his pack, and I can also tell you where his actual captors live today. Yet this information was not released to me directly or readily. This information was only released to me accidentally. . . . up until 1991, August of this year, they have disputed that my father was in fact captured alive.

Sen. SMITH. . . . but now they say otherwise?

O'GRADY. Now they say it, based upon the fact that they have finally found his actual captors and they interviewed them in detail.⁵²⁷

Public relations campaign

Late into the war and after enormous pressure from POW/MIA families, the U.S. Government began to publicize the plight of the POWs in order to keep pressure on the North Vietnamese and gain support for the war at home.

The courageous attempts by H. Ross Perot are particularly noteworthy. His efforts to bring food, medicine, and Christmas packages to POWs in 1969 and 1970 and to publicize their condition improved the way they were treated, as returned POWs later described when they returned. President Nixon's description details Perot's activities and their impact:

Ross Perot supported what we were trying to do in Vietnam, unlike many other people in the business community who took a walk, and I appreciate that. He did everything he could to help the POWs while many others were doing nothing at all. At a time when many people in the American establishment were not supporting the POWs, Ross Perot was doing so.⁵²⁸

Sen. Smith noted Perot's accomplishments when he welcomed him to testify in August:

My words of thanks for your efforts, Mr. Perot, pale in comparison to the recognition you have already received from former POWs themselves, the families, and our nation's veterans groups. As many know, Mr. Perot has a painting proudly hanging in his office which is signed by all the POWs who came home in 1973, thanking him for drawing public attention to their plight. I also note that the Department of Defense awarded Mr. Perot its highest civilian honor for his efforts—the Defense Medal of Distinguished Public Service.⁵²⁹

But the P-R campaign had a stark down-side as well, as families learned when the war ended and many forgot the POWs. In 1972, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird held a press conference to pressure Vietnam by focusing on 14 men not on Hanoi's list of POWs. "All 14 men were known to be alive, on the ground in North Vietnam,

⁵²⁷ O'Grady testimony, Nov. 6, 1991.

⁵²⁸ Nixon interview, July 1992.

⁵²⁹ Sen. Smith, Aug. 12, 1992.

or were at one time actually identified by the North Vietnamese as having been captured," he told his audience.⁵³⁰

In 1973, when not one of those 14 came home—including Ronald Dodge, who was shown in captivity in 1972 in a *Paris Match* photo—there was no follow-up press conference. No similar U.S. effort was mounted again publicly to raise families' unanswered questions about their loved ones' fates to public attention. The families' feeling of being abandoned, with their men, still persists: As Dodge's widow explained:

Sen. REID. What more do you think we as a committee could do that we have not done? . . .

Ms. OTIS. . . . what I've been wanting is for the public to really care. And I know it's been really too long, but the Government and the media didn't press this in the beginning. They just assumed everybody was dead. And we felt so abandoned because not only did our Government or the media care, but the public didn't seem to care.⁵³¹

POST-WAR GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Presumed findings of death

For years after the war ended, few Americans wanted to re-examine its effects; families' questions were greeted with silence.

Then, beginning in 1978 and continuing through 1981, came proceedings to declare missing servicemen dead. The "presumptive findings of death" pitted families against the Government, with many trying to prove life against a presumption so strong that event post-capture photographs and other "hard evidence" failed to persuade the judges. Only one, Charles Shelton, remained listed as the symbolic POW.

For those who accepted the death of their kin, the proceedings were welcomed. They provided finality for a situation that left families dangling, letting families go on with their lives. But for those who had not gotten satisfactory answers, the rulings were traumatic. Their own words best express the experience:

These men—many—were declared dead not on information, but on the lack of information, that we had. . . . Your comment that 'this thing has taken on a life of its own' is so very true. It has taken over my life, and many others' unable to go through the steps of grief and dying and acceptance because of this limbo.⁵³²

Commander Dodge's status change hearing was in February 1979. The next-of-kin had to prove the missing serv-

⁵³⁰ In fact, the list was a mish-mash that included one reported by a returned POW to have died in captivity, five considered to be POWs by neither the DIA nor their own services, and four more considered to be POWs by the DIA, but not their own service. To date, the remains of 10 of the 14 men have been repatriated; the family of the 11th has seen photographs documenting his death, but his remains have not been repatriated.

⁵³¹ Testimony Dec. 8, 1992 of Janis Otis Dodge, wife of POW lost in May, 1967. Ronald Dodge's remains were returned in the early 1980s; in December 1992, Senators Kerry and Smith obtained from the Vietnamese a document, believed authentic by the DIA, indicating that he survived five days in captivity.

⁵³² Letter from the wife of a serviceman missing in South Vietnam since March, 1968.

iceman alive. The Government, with all of their resources, did not have to prove him dead.⁵³³

In 1977, the Air Force Casualty Office contacted me and advised me that they were going to review David's case, and unless I had any new evidence that he was alive, they were going to declare him dead. I then stated that I had no evidence since I was not allowed access to intelligence. Why is it that the burden of proof is always on the families?⁵³⁴

The process, and not only its conclusion, worsened the matter for many families. As the wife of a serviceman missing in Laos in December 1967, explained:

He said the hearing would be held and told me the day. I told him I'd get in touch with my children and we'd be down. He said, "Oh, you don't need to come. It is just a hearing. We will let you know about it." I said, "You are talking about killing off my husband legally. The way you've talked to me so far, I don't trust you."

... He said, "Isn't there anything I can do?" I said, "You can make reservations for me at the visiting quarters. There will be my son, two daughters, my mother and myself." He said, "Oh, I can't do that. You can't stay there. You'll have to get a motel."

They closed my husband's case and declared him killed in action as of August 17, 1979. He was such an honorable, straightforward man; he would not be pleased with the situation I'd been placed in all of these years.⁵³⁵

The League of Families chronicled the process from families' perspective:

Immediately after the signing of the Paris Accords, January 27, 1973, the Department of Defense planned to initiate presumptive finding of death rulings based on U.S. knowledge of incident circumstances and lapse of time without information to indicate the individual was still living. What was obviously not yet available was knowledge from the Vietnamese, Lao or Cambodian governments . . . the families, under the umbrella of the League, initiated a class-action suit to stop the status reviews . . .

The court decided . . . that PNOK [primary next-of-kin] receiving compensation must be provided hearing rights. The Defense Department extended these rights to all PNOK, whether or not currently receiving government benefits. . . ,

Some in the League publicly offered to return their government pay if active-duty status could be retained. This was to prevent the Indochinese governments from throwing back the claim that our own government had legally

⁵³³ Otis testimony, Dec. 3, 1992.

⁵³⁴ Hrdlicka testimony, Dec. 3, 1992.

⁵³⁵ Letter, Dec. 8, 1972.

determined our relatives were dead. This, too, was unsuccessful.

With the presumptive findings of death came another problem; the more presumed dead, the fewer it appeared were still prisoner, missing or unaccounted for from the Vietnam War. We, the families, knew that legal administrative rulings had nothing to do with accountability and that the numbers were actually more [than mere numbers]—they were Americans. . . .⁵³⁶

Changing definitions

At the same time, the U.S. Government added to the POW/MIA list. At the end of 1978, 224 were listed as POWs; by the end of 1980, that had grown to 2,500—simply by changing the definition to include war-time killed-in-action.

Taken together, the action seemed to signal that the Government had made a decision was being made to move on—that one serviceman, whose fate was uncertain, now would get the same level of attention as the next, whose death was witnessed by his comrades.

The solution was satisfactory to no one, and the stroke-of-a-pen changes, based not on facts but on some other consideration, raised even more questions about the sense and sincerity of Government efforts.

Live-sighting reports

For scores of families—including some whose kin's remains had been returned—the next information to be confronted came with the flood of Vietnamese refugees: reports that Americans were alive in Southeast Asia. The reports were tantalizing, and the heavily blacked-out sections of classified information made them more so. The slowness of live-sighting investigations, and the fruitless efforts of families to gain access to the intelligence contained in hundreds of these reports, marked a new battlefield for many families.

Questions during the mid-1980s about the sincerity of U.S. efforts heightened families' concerns. While some of the allegations of conspiracy or incompetence came with fund-raising appeals, others were leaked by insiders with no readily apparent motive besides altruism. A spate of internal DIA reviews spelled out the agency's shortcomings and, for many, confirmed fears that the "highest national priority" label assigned to POW/MIA efforts by the Reagan Administration was nothing more than words.

Repatriation of remains

For some 379 families, the next development was the return of remains from Southeast Asia. In many cases, the remains were only fragments of bone, sometimes commingled in the casket with another serviceman who had died in the same crash. Sometimes, they were determined to be the remains of Asian people; in a few cases, they were found to be animal bones. Serious questions about the capability of the U.S. lab that identifies remains to make accu-

⁵³⁶ Griffiths letter, Aug. 6, 1992.

rate determinations further shook families' faith in the U.S. Government (see Chapter 5).

In the half-century since World War II, technology has bettered the chance of identifying remains, but the science is far from an exact one.

There have been so many conflicting reports concerning Bill. We have always felt he was alive, and being held in Russia, even though remains (a few single teeth said to compare favorably with Bill's) was sent home in November of 1957. When we had the casket opened by court order, we found a sack with a few single teeth and a few bone fragments so that identification was impossible as far as we were concerned. We buried the body as Bill, even though we still believed that he was in Russia.

We have felt so helpless all these years, trying and trying to get positive proof of whether he is in Russia or not. My parents both died believing that the U.S. Government had not been honest with them. . . .⁵³⁷

The combination of:

past experience with the Government on POW/MIA matters;
only partly conclusive results; and
the new number of bones available to make the determination

makes it impossible for many families to accept the remains as proof of their kin's death.

Each day I wait, and look, and hope for some revelation as to how did my son die—if he did! Oh yes, I know my Government considers [his case] a closed book because Hanoi sent back a box of bones with his name on it. But there was no identification tag, nor picture, nor anything in the way of personal effects found on his person returned to us. No fingerprints! No dental records!

I do know Hanoi had David either dead or alive—the Pravda (1965) article told me that. He did not go down in his plane as previously thought. I want any and all information my Government has on David—my family can handle it! . . .⁵³⁸

Casualty officers

I was shocked, surprised and stunned It took some getting used to, and I can't describe the overwhelming relief I felt, knowing how, where and when he died, and that it was quick. . . . My baby, Sue, was six weeks old when the telegram was delivered to me. . . . In an instant, I [had] lost my husband, home, status as a wife, social life, my planned future—and I was just getting over childbirth. I heard nothing from the three surviving crew members. All official business was handled by mail. I had no advisor or advocate from the military to help me sort out my life

⁵³⁷ Letter from the sister of a serviceman captured near Burma during World War II.

⁵³⁸ Letter, December 1992.

and figure out what I should do. I felt abandoned. . . . a way must be found to see that dependents of men who died serving their country are given the personal support they need.⁵³⁹

The Defense Department has come a great distance since the days of telegrams announcing the loss of a serviceman. Today, officers serve the point of contact for families and the efforts of most are well-regarded by the families they serve.

However, few have the experience and clout needed to pry information out of the DIA, and their stints in the job are short: except in the Air Force, assignments last no more than three years. This forces families to drive the information-gathering process—and their lack of security clearance and knowledge ill-equips them to get the answers they seek.

Simply put, the agencies of our Government responsible for the MIA issue do not provide us of their own volition and in a timely manner all information that they had about my father's fate, despite their often-repeated promise to do just that.⁵⁴⁰

The inability of casualty officers to satisfy families' legitimate needs for information often worsens communication. In their eagerness to learn all they can, many families have turned to other channel—pressing intelligence analysts or private activist for more. The different interpretations, and sometimes different facts, obtained through these channels have exposed a bureaucracy that is lumbering and often senseless in its operations. It has left many families unsure about who to believe.

Our family has never been officially told that Steven was taken prisoner, but we had received a declassified document from another POW/MIA family, that stated Steven was positively identified by photograph in November of 1968 (three months after his disappearance) as being taken prisoner. I do not know which list he now falls under, the 111 confirmed to have died in captivity or the 133 of whom no other information is available. I'm sure we will be notified in time.

I just wanted to say we are proud of Steven for his unselfishness in fighting for his country, and how proud we are of you and the committee for having the courage to look into this matter to the extent you have in order to resolve the issue.⁵⁴¹

Secretary Cheney's plan to use the POW/MIA office to troubleshoot is commendable, but further efforts to unify POW/MIA operations are needed. Too much is lost in "translation" between the men women in the field and POW/MIA families, because information goes first through DIA and then casualty office channels. Oftentimes, information also is passed through the Inter-Agency

⁵³⁹ Wife of serviceman missing since October, 1952; advised by telephone in November, 1992 that Soviets had recovered his remains.

⁵⁴⁰ Steven Morrissey, son of Maj. Robert Morrissey, lost in Laos in November, 1972.

⁵⁴¹ Brother of serviceman captured in [place] in 196—.

Group (see Chapter 5), further delaying notification of the individual's family.

While the Committee recognizes the need for some "channels," it also urges DoD to let the public, and especially family members, hear directly from those who have first-hand information about searching for unaccounted-for servicemen.⁵⁴²

FAMILIES TURN ELSEWHERE FOR HELP

The National League of Families

The League's origins can be traced to the West Coast during the late 1960s. Sybil Stockdale, wife of Admiral James Stockdale, the ranking POW in the "Hanoi Hilton," initiated the movement which evolved from a loosely organized, small group of families into the formal organization now known as the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

The impetus for this action was the strong belief by these POW families that the U.S. Government's policy of keeping a low profile on POW/MIAs was unjustified and causing the families undue pain—and perhaps even risking the lives, health and the very return of their missing loved ones (as described above in "War-Time Secrecy.")

In October 1968, the first media account of a POW story was published. As a result of that story, many families began to communicate directly with each other. What once was a small group grew to hundreds and ultimately several thousand family members.

The League's first major activity was to directly confront the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris with inquiries about the fate of their loved ones. On other occasions, family members travelled to Laos and Vietnam on their own to seek answers.

Over the past 25 years, both during and after the war, the League has pressed hard through its public awareness programs and its intense pressure on the U.S. Government to get answers. The League's goals are:

- to obtain the release of all prisoners;
- repatriation of all recoverable remains;
- to provide the fullest possible accounting for all of the missing.

Through the U.S. Government's POW/MIA Inter-Agency Group, the League has participated over the last decade in the development of official policy in the areas of intelligence and diplomatic efforts on the POW/MIA issue. The participation of the League's Executive Director, Ann Mills Griffiths, as a member of the IAG has led to great controversy and division among family members (see Chapter 5), but even critics recognized that Griffiths' participation on the IAG has given the League a key role in influencing government policy on the POW/MIA issue, however. In addition, the Committee recognizes that the League has provided a continuity to changing U.S. officials' responsible for policy on this issue spanning 25 years and five Presidencies of both political parties.

⁵⁴² Until the Committee's November 1991 hearings, field investigators had not spoken publicly about their work.

The National Alliance of Families

The Alliance was founded in Seattle in June 1990 under the leadership of Dolores Alfond, sister of Maj. Victor Apodaca who is missing from the Vietnam War. The Alliance has been a leader in the effort to unite family members, former POWs and other citizens who seek information on missing personnel from World War II, the Korean Conflict, Cold War incidents, and the Vietnam War.

The Alliance also has been a strong advocate for the declassification of all Government documents pertaining to the missing from these wars. Another primary purpose of the National Alliance has been to educate communities (including public and civic organizations, schools, and the general public) about POW/MIA issues. Like the League, the Alliance also has held major forums with family members and Government official in Washington, D.C.

Fellow combat veterans

Another, natural alternative for families hungry for information was the men who served with their kin. Contracts were ad hoc and often secretive: officially, the Government observed servicemen's privacy rights; unofficially, individual servicemen often passed on information as personal favors, and witnesses regularly reached out to their buddies' families voluntarily. For untold numbers of families, the stories that these witnesses told made the difference.

I know my brother went down into the South China Sea. The radar technician was a very good friend of the family and he watched the plane go down into the sea. So I feel I know where my brother is. I feel he was not captured, so as far as I'm concerned, he's gone. Let him lie in peace.⁵⁴³

For some veterans, though, the requests continued—from family members unable to accept their necessarily incomplete stories, or from children who wanted to hear it first-hand. Often, the requests were not only for the facts of a 20-year-old incident, but for an explanation of the war itself, an answer to rumors, and more. In one letter to the son of an MIA, his co-pilot struggled to answer cosmic questions with a careful recounting of facts:

What happened to your dad and I was the real definition of rotten coincidence . . . [We were on a mission to make] strikes into Laos and Cambodia to stop supplies from getting into South Vietnam from the North. We didn't talk much about them only as a matter of policy. There were not "secret missions" or CIA-driven . . .

As we rolled in and released the bombs, two anti-aircraft rounds struck the airplane on the starboard (right) side forward of the engine intake. The explosion caused the engine to explode also and the right wing blew off at the fold. At this point, we looked at each other and ejected from the aircraft. I went out a second or so before Mike and wound up on the west side of a small river. He was on the east . . . the material and people we were after were there.

⁵⁴³ sister of KIA-BNR.

I gathered my stuff, hid it, called our wingman and tried to talk to Mike on the radio kind of all at once. I also found that my hands and face were burned pretty well and there was some shrapnel in my arm and head. At this point, these were the least of our problems. I then tried to find Mike by wandering around in the jungle in the dark (12:30 a.m.). Not a good idea as I fell down a small cliff (8-10 feet) and had to climb out. At this time I could see down to the river and saw 4-6 troopers come across the river and head my way. I hid in a bamboo thicket and waited. . . .

There was enough evidence that Mike might be held in the general area where we were hit that a "bright light" team was interested to attempt to find and rescue him. They are mercenaries that "lived in the area." They found nothing indicating his having been there. You've been told the rest and most likely more than I. It was hard to accept, but I feel he was killed that first night. I would hope that I was wrong.

Your dad was a great guy and a good friend. He did his job better than most, but unfortunately was killed. The best part is he was doing what he loved the most.⁵⁴⁴

Private groups

. . . you become obsessed. You cannot sleep, eat, work, because you would waltz with the devil to bring one man home.⁵⁴⁵

The Government's shortcomings in live-sighting investigations and elsewhere prompted some families to turn to latter-day Rambos, as well as to responsible veterans and family organizations, for additional help.

Most of us have been tempted at some point to participate in some form of POW rescue based on nothing more than questionable and circumstantial information at best, such as unverified photos, live sightings, and anonymous reports. If it sounds hokey and mystic, it probably is, and it almost always plays a very cruel hoax on the families by raising false hopes. . . I am very pleased to know this committee will take up these issues and problems in the near future, and hope this will eliminate once and for all the con artists, and clear the way for those who are credible and knowledgeable to resolve the long standing tragedy of our MIAs.⁵⁴⁶

Another POW/MIA wife was not able to ignore the information proffered by a private group:

After the [positive] analysis had come out from Los Alamos and Dr. Charney I began to doubt my own view of the picture, which was there was a slight possibility that it

⁵⁴⁴ Co-pilot of serviceman missing in Laos since December, 1968.

⁵⁴⁵ Carr Collins testimony, Dec. 3, 1992; former wife of serviceman missing in Laos since 19—.

⁵⁴⁶ Collins testimony, Dec. 3, 1992.

could be Don. I mean I just—I did not know. But something that my son said to me sort of turned me around. He said, "Mother, that picture is obviously an American. I mean he looks like an American to me . . . he's somebody's father, he's somebody's brother, husband, cousin. If there's a chance in a billion that it's my dad, you've got to do something."

So with that, that's when I started.⁵⁴⁷

The result of many encounters are devastating, emotionally and financially.

One former Congressman was shown on a nation-wide television show telling a national audience that he knows who the prisoners are and where they are. He should be made to go on nationwide television and retract his lies.

One former Lieutenant Colonel has been exposed on television for claiming a photo he obtained was of an American prisoner still in captivity. This was nothing more than a diabolical plot to raise money; [it] caused the family involved untold grief and compelled our Government to expend untold assets to track down this 'prisoner.'

One extremely convincing former Lieutenant Colonel Bo Gritz hoodwinked me into believing his story that he knew where prisoners were being held in Laos and could get them out. In 1981, the prisoner and missing issue was getting little or no attention and I saw this as an opportunity—not necessarily to recover my son, but to get at least one prisoner out to prove what we had been working for. Since my wife and I had been notified by the Navy Department that our son "had survived to evade" and were informed by his squadron commander that Nick had been captured and escaped, I am sure you can appreciate the vulnerable situation we were in. The "secret rescue mission" failed very quickly; it never got out of the state of Florida and cost us \$30,000, with nary an apology.

. . . I am not bemoaning the loss of money since that operation is one-tenth of the amount our family has spent in our 23 years of involvement. But I do believe that this Committee has a responsibility to investigate and, where necessary, prosecute these incredible liars. . . .⁵⁴⁸

The fraudulent sideshows also sidetracks U.S. investigators away from serious leads and force them to chase phantoms:

Sen. McCAIN. "How much of the effort that your organization is engaged in has been—how much of your assets have had to be diverted to tracking down the bogus pictures and the hoaxers?"

Mr. SHEETZ. At times, Senator, I would tell you that process has literally precluded us from doing anything else. Because the political pressure has been so intense

⁵⁴⁷ Carr Collins testimony, Dec. 3, 1992.

⁵⁴⁸ George L. Brooks letter Dec. 1, 1992; father of Lt. Nicholas G. Brooks (USN), shot down over Laos Jan. 2, 1970, and Chairman Emeritus of the National League of Families.

and the high interest among the people in the Government, this committee, the American public, to know what is the truth on those cases. . . . It's an opportunity-cost argument. Essentially, what you're doing is dropping the work that would probably have more payoff to chase after things that ultimately turn out to be useless exercises.⁵⁴⁹

DISCUSSION

The committee wishes to commend the families and advocacy groups for their strong leadership and perseverance over the years. They have moved the issue in a positive manner in spite of incredible obstacles. The most difficult obstacles were the intransigence of the Communist governments and the lack of focus and attention by the U.S. Government at many points during the last 40 years.

At the Committee's first round of hearings, in November 1991, all witnesses—families, activists, and government officials—agreed that, “. . . one of the most important things that could come out of the early days of these hearings is a new structure, and a new relationship process with the families.”⁵⁵⁰ Assistant Secretary Carl Ford explained:

. . . we didn't lose our credibility with you, with the families, with the American people overnight and we're not going to gain that credibility back overnight. . . . The only thing that is going to persuade people is our actions and our results, and to prove over time that we are serious, that we do mean what we say, and that despite occasional setbacks, despite occasional human errors, we're going to demonstrate over the next months and weeks, years, that we can do it better than we have done it in the past. That's our only commitment, to try. And if there are problems that this committee uncovers, we'll try to fix them.

In addition to other steps noted above, two actions taken on behalf of POW/MIA families during the last year have been significant:

To answer families need for an ombudsman that both DIA and casualty officers would respond to, Defense Secretary Richard Cheney created a top-level liaison office at the Pentagon in January 1992. The job of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for POW/MIA Affairs is to spearhead POW/MIA policy-making and to try to get answers when casualty officers cannot.

POW/MIA documents were ordered declassified in July 1992 by President Bush, at the unanimous request of the Senate. This step was taken in conjunction with the establishment of a central “library” that families can turn to for consolidated information about their case and others, in accordance with an amendment sponsored by Sen. McCain and enacted in November, 1991. (See Chapter 5, Declassification).

The most substantive response to families' concerns, however, has been field operations that have put American troops on the

⁵⁴⁹ Robert Sheetz testimony, Dec. 1, 1992.

⁵⁵⁰ Kerry, Nov. 5, 1991.

ground in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia to search for answers. For most of the past 20 years, U.S. investigators shuttled back and forth from Bangkok to Hanoi whenever they could get permission from Vietnam. Then, a month before the Committee was formed, a temporary U.S. POW/MIA office in Hanoi was permitted to open; that became permanent in November, 1992.

Increased Vietnamese cooperation, won by Presidential Emissary Gen. John Vessel (USA, Ret.), Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon, and three Senate delegations to Southeast Asia, widened U.S. investigators' access, letting them go to places where Americans were reported seen alive after the war, talk to prison guards and others who may know what happened to missing Americans, and examine archives and top-secret files that hold promises of more answers.

For many POW/MIA families, however, 20 years' experience dealing with the Government makes it difficult to accept these new promises. Answers about their kin's fate are still necessary—but they are not sufficient to explain the intervening 20 years of U.S. Government run-around and worse—and the lack of concern by Communist governments for basic human dignity.

The Committee's review of past family experiences reflects an array of problems in dealing with our government that never should have happened. With proper organization, planning sensitivity and openness, the Committee believes these problems can be avoided in the future.

Recommendations

The Government has wavered repeatedly in its efforts to account for missing servicemen. Their families never have.

POW/MIA families want action, not more promises. The best that the U.S. Government can do for them is to do its best for their missing kin. The Committee believes the following steps must be taken to assure families that the Government is doing its best, and not simply assigning a priority that is merely words.

Accordingly, the Committee recommends:

Those actually working on POW/MIA accounting in the field in Southeast Asia should be made available, when schedules permit, to meet with families in the United States.

Military service casualty offices should be headed by civilians who are not subject to the kind of routine duty rotations experienced by military personnel. Individuals in these sensitive positions must have experience and a base of institutional memory if they are to deal effectively and knowledgeably with family members.

The resumed publication of a regular newsletter containing POW/MIA related information would be a useful means of sharing new developments with the families.

Guidelines should be established immediately for the creation of a central computerized data base within the Executive branch with information on all unaccounted for U.S. personnel from past military conflicts, to include World War II, Korea, the Cold War and Vietnam. All relevant casualty and intelligence data, in addition to any recently obtained information potentially correlating to a specific case should be made read-

ily available to family members and researchers through the central data base. On-line access to the central data base should be made available through an easily accessible modem system.

Procedures also should be developed to ensure that requests for information contained in the data base can be processed easily so that family members receive prompt, printed responses when necessary. Additionally, procedures should be established by the Department of Defense and the Department of State to ensure that the data base is updated regularly. The Committee further recommends that the Secretary of Defense authorize the DOD family liaison officer to work with the service casualty officers to develop a data base program which meets the needs of families and researchers who need to use the system.

Family members of Vietnam era POW/MIAs who would like to travel to Southeast Asia for direct discussions with appropriate U.S. and foreign government officials should be encouraged and helped to do so.

CHAPTER 8: GAUGING COOPERATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN GOVERNMENTS

It is not possible to account for the Americans who are missing from the war in Southeast Asia without cooperation from the governments of the region, especially Vietnam. Over the years, our government has requested this cooperation in four forms.

First, we have requested all information about live American prisoners, former prisoners or deserters.

Second, we have asked for the return of any recovered or recoverable remains of missing American servicemen.

Third, we have sought access to files, records, documents and other materials that are relevant to the fates of missing Americans.

Finally, we have asked for permission to visit certain locations within these countries to investigate live-sighting reports and search for actual or suspected airplane crash sites.

VIETNAM

The U.S. has long believed that Vietnam knows a great deal more about the fate of missing Americans than they have acknowledged. This view was based on our belief that the North Vietnamese maintained detailed records of U.S. servicemen who came within their prison system during the war, including many lost in North Vietnamese-controlled areas of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. U.S. intelligence agencies are convinced, moreover, that the Government of Vietnam at one time recovered and stored an unknown quantity of remains of American servicemen, apparently for release at politically strategic points in time.

The level of U.S.-Vietnamese cooperation in accounting for missing Americans has varied over the years depending on bilateral and global political conditions and on the degree of emphasis placed on the issue by U.S. officials. At the time the Select Committee was created, there was considerable progress being made in